

The politics of personal name: Naming and self-renaming among the Oromo of Ethiopia

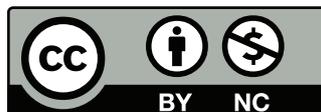
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Abstract

This article deals with the new trend of giving and changing personal names and self-naming among the Oromo in Ethiopia in the context of the post-1991 Ethiopian political landscape. The post-1991 situation indicates the ever-increasing introduction of new forms of Oromo personal names and the change of non-Oromo names into Oromo. Interview, focus group discussion, observation and document analysis were used to obtain qualitative data. The findings of the study indicate that there are various factors contributing to the introduction of new styles of crafting and changing personal names among the Oromo. These involve social values, political feelings, identity construction, personal benefit and various combinations of these. Yet there are still controversies on the social, political and linguistic implications of the newly emerging Oromo personal names. Some of our informants argued that the fashionable Oromo names do not sound like Oromo terms, both in their structure and pronunciation. They have veiled meanings (or are disguised names) with conflicting aspirations of returning to Oromo names on the one hand and disassociating oneself from conventional Oromo names on the other.

Keywords: Oromo, personal name giving, personal name change, politics of personal name, self-renaming



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Personal name in Oromo: An overview

The Oromo is one of the Cushitic speaking groups residing in Ethiopia and Northern Kenya. They occupy an area that extends from Northeastern Ethiopia to Northern Kenya and from the Sudan in the west to the Somali-inhabited land in the east (Lewis 1984). Within present-day Ethiopia, the Oromo is the largest ethnic group. They were incorporated into the present Ethiopian state during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This was when the modern Ethiopian state was established through the southward military expansion of the monarchical regimes from the north.

Traditionally, the Oromo name their children referring to the day, place, season, calendar, the specific circumstances or special events (political, environmental, social, economic, natural, etc.) related to the birth of the children. Names are used to express feelings, grievances and aspirations of the parents, family and/or clan of the child. They also refer to the physical appearance and behavioural features of the child. Oromo personal names are also indicators of the Oromo belief system, ideology, culture, philosophy and thought. They are thus best understood and analysed in the framework of their socio-cultural, environmental, political and economic contexts (Gerba 2015: 30; Kabbee 2007).

Jamo (1974 EC¹) provides a list of some frequently given personal names among the Oromo. Examples of common Oromo names for males are: *Badhaasaa* ‘one who rewards’, *Gammachuu* ‘happiness’, *Araarsaa* ‘one who reconciles’, *Raggaasaa* ‘one who fixes’, *Firoomsaa* ‘one who makes relatives’, *Tulluu* ‘mountain’, *Oljirraa* ‘we are in a better position’ and *Guddisaa* ‘one who takes care of others’. Examples of common names for females are *Gaaddisee* ‘one who provides shade’, *Ayyaantuu* ‘one with good fortune’, *Baayyisee* ‘one who multiplies’, *Lalisee* ‘sprouting’, *Obsee* ‘tolerance’, *Ibsituu* ‘one who shines’, *Urgee* ‘one with good aroma’, *Hirphee* ‘compensating’ and *Kumee* ‘thousands’ or ‘one that multiplies’. These names are chosen by the name-givers and refer to certain important events and the time and place of birth. Parents also give names aspiring for the success and growth of the child as well as health, peace, happiness and prosperity for the family. Among the Oromo, a name like *Galgaloo* ‘in the evening’ is a typical example referring to birth time. Personal names like *Boonayyaa* ‘dry season’ and *Roobaa* ‘one who rains’ refer to the weather conditions at the time that the child was born. A name like *Diimaa* ‘brightly coloured’ refers to the skin colour of the child. With the introduction of Islam and Christianity, Muslim and Biblical, or baptismal names, have also emerged (Gemechu 2007).

In the political context following the formation of the modern Ethiopian state, a number of socio-cultural, political and psychological factors contributed to changes in Oromo personal names. These changes were directly linked to the assimilation policies of the various political regimes that held power until the 1991 downfall of the socialist regime.² Throughout this time, the Oromo lived under pressure from state assimilation policy, which Markakis (1991) defines as Christianisation and Amharisation. As a result, many Oromo took Amhara names (Debela &

¹ Ethiopia has a different calendar with 13 months in a year and September 11 as its New Year. All the 12 months have 30 days and the 13th month has five days in common years and six days in a leap year. The Ethiopian calendar is always behind the Gregorian calendar by eight years between January 1 and September 10 and seven years between September 11 and December 31.

² After the formation of the modern Ethiopian state at the end of the nineteenth century, the country was ruled by monarchical regimes until the coming to power of the dictatorial socialist regime in 1974, which in turn collapsed in 1991. The state assimilation policy persisted throughout these successive regimes until the 1991 introduction of ethnic federalism.

Kassam 1996). Directly relevant to this claim is one of the popular articles written by the 1960s student activist Walleign Mekonnen in 1969. This article is often cited to indicate the extent and impact of the then prevailing assimilation policy. As he writes:

Is it not simply Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy? Ask anybody what Ethiopian culture is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian language is? Ask anybody what Ethiopian music is? Ask anybody what the “national dress” is? It is either Amhara or Amhara-Tigre!!

To be a “genuine Ethiopian” one has to speak Amharic, to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara-Tigre religion, Orthodox Christianity and to wear the Amhara-Tigre Shamma in international conferences. In some cases to be an “Ethiopian”, you will even have to change your name. In short to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (Mekonnen 1969: 2).

It was in the context of the stated assimilation mission that a war minister of the *Haile Selassie* (1930–74) regime, who was from an Oromo family, changed his original name *Qusii Diinagdee* to *Habtegiworgis Diinagdee*. *Habtegiworgis*, which means property of St. George, was his baptismal name. Laureate *Tsegaye Gebremedhin*, who was a highly regarded Ethiopian poet, changed his Oromo name *Qawwisaa Roobaa* for the same reason (Kabbee 2007).

Since the 1991 introduction of ethnic federalism, this trend has been changing. Many Oromo youth have changed their personal names from non-Oromo (mainly Amharic) names to Oromo names. Personal name changes are also undertaken within Oromo names. These new trends in name changing can be understood as a response to the post-1991 Ethiopian political landscape, which guarantees the promotion of languages, cultures and history of the different ethnic groups. Since 1991, Afaan Oromo (Oromo Language) has served as a medium of instruction, an official language for the National Regional State of Oromia³ and a written language.⁴ This article thus deals with the crafting of new personal names and self-renaming among the Oromo in Ethiopia in the context of the post-1991 Ethiopian political environment. It aims to elucidate the trend of personal name giving and changing, as well as the factors that contribute to these effects.

³ Oromia is one of the member states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and serves as the mother state of the Oromo.

⁴ Until 1991, there were few materials written in Oromo language with Ge'ez script called *fidal*. After the downfall of the Ethiopian socialist regime and introduction of ethnic federalism in 1991, the Oromo adopted a modified form of the Latin alphabet to write Oromo language.

Theoretical framework

Personal names

Personal names are the most important words for social interactions (Griffin 2010: 345-46). Someone without a name is socially and psychologically less than a full person (Agyekum 2006: 208). Naming has thus been a common cultural practice since the development of rudimentary language; yet proper names have no universal set of formal properties (Lambek 2006: 121; Agyekum 2006: 207).

In onomastic studies, understanding the relationship between name and referent is an important issue. Nonetheless, the answer to this question is not the same for all naming practices, even within a given language. The two central theories responding to this question are the descriptivist and the causal views. On the one hand, description theories assert that a name's semantic referent is determined by related descriptions or clusters of descriptions (McKinsey 2010). More explicitly, Weber (2008: 347) states that "names refer to objects basically because, and only because, speakers use names to refer to objects". The meaning of a proper name is the same as the meaning of the description of the individual to whom the name refers (Goss-Grubbs 2006). On the other hand, causal theories present that a name's semantic referent is determined by some sort of causal chain established between uses of the name and the name's referent. This view recognises the importance of the first act of naming, for it suggests that each subsequent use of the name is connected to the initial "grounding" of the name (Goss-Grubbs 2006; Weber 2008).

Taking another perspective, according to McKinsey (2010: 328), these theories can be re-categorised into social practice theory and individualistic theory. On the one hand, social practice theory promotes the view that a name's semantic referent is determined by a social practice that implicates the name's referent in one way or another. This theory suggests that the semantic referent of a given use of a name is determined by a causal chain of communication that links the use to the first calling of an object by that name. Once the name is endorsed it is used by subsequent name users to refer to the same thing as the original user from whom the name is acquired. However, for McKinsey (2010) this approach is fallacious in relation to names that one can independently learn from other sources and go on to use to refer to that person or object. McKinsey does not refute the social character of names, but denies that the social character of names is relevant to their semantics. A name is an arbitrary characteristic that enable others to identify the person or thing that the name refers to. This leads to the conclusion that names are like tags that we put on things to identify them. In other words, names are not always words of a language.

On the other hand, individualistic theory presents the view that each particular use of a name has its semantic referent that merely depends on the speaker's state of mind and their relation to the referent (McKinsey 2010). McKinsey introduced a new form of individualistic cluster-of-descriptions theory, which combines features of both description theory and social practice theory, as an alternative view of understanding the semantic properties of proper names. This view suggests that names do not have any specific meanings in language. The semantic properties of proper names are dependent on the intellectual capacities and dispositions of individual speakers. McKinsey (2010: 352) explicitly states that "particular uses of names cannot just inherit their semantic properties from those of the name-types being used, and thus there can be no such thing as a name use that both has a semantic referent and yet is not understood by its speaker". The semantic properties of proper names are independent of social practice.

However, in responding to the question “how are the semantic referents of names determined”, McKinsey suggests that to use a word as a name one must be engaging in a practice. Yet this might be the practice of a single speaker. This theory is relevant to this article, because, as our analysis will show, the new trend of changing personal names and self-renaming is about individuals’ practices as dictated by the personal interests of the name giver or bearer regardless of any name giving social practices.

Language and personal name

Names are indexically linked to socio-cultural values as well as functions, places, time, people and events. Agyekum (2006: 231, 210-12) shows that there are three interrelated analytical concepts pertinent to personal names that support the understanding of the function of language in culture. These are performance, participation and indexicality. Firstly, performance refers to a domain of human action where communicative events take place. Name giving is socially performed to serve certain socio-cultural purposes. Secondly, participation shows how communicative events go beyond linguistic expressions and utterances to the socio-cultural domain to entail a bigger class of social activities. Naming follows both performance and participation because tagging may direct how the person acts and participates in social activities. Finally, indexicality is the most important of the three in explaining naming practice. In indexicality, language is not only a tool for the labelling of the bearer of a name, but it is also used for permanently designating, assessing and replicating the socio-cultural world of a cultural group. This article presents the analysis of Oromo personal names in relation to these three analytical concepts.

Personal name and identity

Names have clear links with personal and social identities. When we name someone, we ensure the person a condition for identity (Mandende 2009: 22; Lambek 2006: 118). Names reveal the bearer’s cultural, sectarian and social identities. They indicate one’s worth in both material and spiritual worlds (Mandende 2009; Layne 2006: 48). Many people consider their names as something real, consecrated and a distinct part of their personality, just as much as their eyes or ears. The bearers of the names believe that any mishandling of their names is a wound inflicted upon any part of their body (Bodenhorn & Vom Bruck 2006: 9). This view suggests that names are identity markers.

In legal terms, everyone has the right to be named, and a name converts “anybody” into “somebody”. Through naming, infants are admitted into certain social identities and their lives thus become entangled—via these names—in the life histories of others. Names have the capacity to define social boundaries as well as to bridge them (Bodenhorn & Vom Bruck 2006: 3). Giving names to babies for registration purpose marks the nexus of law and names. Names which individualise also socialise at the same time.

Names that fix identities can be detached from those identities, and this often causes tension (Lambek 2006: 122-23). Tension happens when a name fails to mark the identity of its bearer. Personal names have the role of locating the named in a certain situation in terms of religion, gender, ethnicity, social status, etc., which determines the rights and obligations of the name-bearer (Mandende 2009: 8). For instance, Debela and Kassam (1996: 32) indicate how

in the context of the Ethiopian state assimilation policy an Oromo couple gave their children Amhara names to protect their children from any possible persecution as a result of their names. One of the informants of these authors narrated that her Amhara name was intended to hide her Oromo identity, but she did not like her name. Later, in exile she renamed herself with an Oromo name of her choice. This woman acknowledged that her parents opted for non-Oromo names to make life easier for their children. This implies that names are valuable economically as well as politically, because names can cause either integration or segregation. That is why Lambek (2006: 122-23) states that identities can be stolen, traded, suspended and even erased.

Giving, choosing and changing of personal names

Usually, personal names are given by someone else other than the bearer of the names (Hugh-Jones 2006: 80; Lambek 2006). Parents and other family members, including siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents and other family elders, but in some circumstances, also traditional doctors and/or religious leaders are eligible to designate a child's name (Bodenhorn 2006; Mandende 2009).

The time of naming also varies from culture to culture, ranging from the time of pregnancy until long after birth (Mandende 2009). In anthropology, biological and social births are issues in name giving. Social birth occurs later than biological birth and is usually marked by certain ceremonies, such as the seclusion of mothers and babies, reintegration and naming the babies as new member of the society (Layne 2006). Regardless of who the name-giver is and the time of naming, the choice of the name is influenced by several natural, social and political contexts related to the birth of the child and the interests and/or feelings of the name-giver.

Personal names are context bound. Both the name-givers and name-bearers are inseparable from the community in which they are embedded. As a result, subjectivity, identity and naming are guided by the social and political environments (Palsson 2014).

On the one hand, name giving entails different rituals in different cultures (Bodenhorn & Vom Bruck 2006: 11). This is how the formal and conventional connections between specific names and persons are made through performative speech acts which may entail baptism, the signing of legal registries or ancestral blessing. These performative acts are generally sanctified and authorised, thus signalling the transition from a person without a name to a person with a certain name (Lambek 2006: 123).

On the other hand, names are like consumer goods. There is name fashion; names can go in and out of fashion just like clothing and hairstyles. Like other gifts, a name-giver expresses their taste and values through the name. Furthermore, a name as a gift offered by someone else other than the bearer of the name may also express qualities that the gift giver wishes for the recipient (Layne 2006: 43). However, it is possible for an individual to change their original name freely as long as it does not impinge on the rights of others (Benson 2006). People change their names owing to various factors, such as change in social status, change in social and political environment, and adoption of a new religion (Agyekum 2006: 226; Benson 2006: 201). Personal names also have the potential to become political currency. There are two types of politics in this regard: one aims at marginalisation, control and enslavement, and the other aims at emancipation (Benson 2006: 188). Something can be named, de-named and renamed, and the act contributes to an understanding of "the person" in a comparative perspective (Hansen 2006).

Pertinent to changing personal names and self-renaming Benson (2006) and Agyekum

(2006) provide important empirical examples. Benson (2006: 195) shows that since 1960, black American parents have tended to drop conferring conventional names on their children, opting instead for new kinds of African names, consulting books offering lists of African names. Such renaming is an attempt to distinguish oneself and to transcend a painful history. Similarly, Agyekum (2006: 228) indicates that through contact with the Europeans and the introduction of Islam and Christianity, some Akans in Ghana dropped their family names and opted for their religious names as a sign of 'westernisation'. However, the last two or three decades have shown the revival of nationalist names among the Akan. Many people have realised that the Akan personal names are markers of their cultural identity and have therefore given Akan names to their children. Agyekum shows that even those who had foreign names have legally changed their names to Akan ones. These empirical instances are relevant to the post-1991 change of non-Oromo names into Oromo names and the introduction of new fashionable Oromo names as a reversal of the pre-1991 state policy of assimilation.

Methods and materials

This study employs purely qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The main research data consists of interviews, observations, focus group discussions and official documents. Firstly, we (the authors) conducted personal interviews with fifteen participants, four females and eleven males, who had changed their names. Some participants were selected by using convenience sampling procedures. Convenience sampling was the most appropriate method to recruit participants for this study as it is very difficult to randomly identify individuals who are Oromo and thus potential informants. To reach the remaining participants, we used the snowball sampling procedure. In addition to the few informants we identified at the initial stage, our research participants recruited other participants for the study. Secondly, we conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen university teachers from different disciplines who are ethnic Oromo: eleven of them were male and five females. Seven of them have no children and the rest have at least one child. The purpose behind these interviews was to investigate how educated people perceive and explain the current trend of Oromo personal naming. Our aim was also to obtain information on what kind of names they have given to their children and the reasons why. Purposive (judgment) and criterion sampling procedures were used to select these participants.

Thirdly, we had two focus group discussions with university students. Each group consisted of six discussants, altogether three females and nine males. Seven of the participants had changed their names whereas five of them had not. The meanings of the recently coined personal names and the motives behind changing personal names were important points of discussion. The individual views of the discussants were useful to access different perspectives on the issue under discussion. Female participants were few; yet we believe that this has no gendered implication for the study.⁵

Fourthly, we collected data through unstructured observation. Unusual and/or new forms of Oromo names were captured through our day-to-day observations and encounters and

⁵ The introduction of new styles of personal names as well as self-renaming practices are not gender specific. We find fairly distributed fashionable Oromo names for females and males. Both men and women change their names within Oromo and from non-Oromo to Oromo names. Whether there are variations in the nature and meanings of fashionable Oromo male and female names can be a topic of further investigation.

through reading different sources such as billboards⁶ and list of students. Through this approach, more than 80 recently coined Oromo names were collected, some of which we focus on in our analysis.

Finally, data for this study were also obtained from official documents. We consulted Jimma University Registrar's Office to assess the trend of personal name changes during the academic years of 2014/2015, 2015/2016 and 2016/2017. Sixty-four (64) personal name changes during the academic year of 2014/15 were randomly picked and analysed as additional data. These data were used to indicate the patterns of personal name change in terms of language.

Emerging and changing Oromo personal names

Personal name fashion among the Oromo

New forms of personal names have been emerging among the Oromo in the last two decades. These names are new in their structure, their guiding principle and meanings. They are combined words structured by blending verbs with other word forms (for instance, pronouns). The following are some examples drawn from our day-to-day observations and from our informants.

Table 1

Afaan Oromo	English Gloss	Afaan Oromo	English Gloss
<i>Anajaan</i>	'myself with my eye'	<i>Feeneti</i>	'we wanted'
<i>Ofjaan</i>	'self by one's eye'	<i>Waanofii</i>	'one's own'
<i>Naa'ol</i>	'above me'	<i>Ifanaaf</i>	'bright for me'
<i>Naaftaate</i>	'in favour of me'	<i>Koonaaf</i>	'mine is for me'
<i>Naahil</i>	'sympathise with me'	<i>Oftaanaa</i>	'let us be ourselves'
<i>Naanati</i>	'humble for me'	<i>Yaannet</i>	'we did purposely'
<i>Naanbooni</i>	'be proud of me'	<i>Roobenaas</i>	'it rained for me too'
<i>Naabooni</i>	'be proud for me'	<i>Taanenus</i>	'we are also done'
<i>Naataanan</i>	'it is fine for me'	<i>Roobenuus</i>	'it rained for us too'
<i>Naatol</i>	'be good for me'	<i>Jiinenus</i>	'we too are fertile'

Each name in the list is predominantly made up of two Oromo words *naaf* 'for me', *ofi* 'my/myself', *koo* 'mine', *naas* 'for me too' and *nus* 'we/us' plus another word. These words appear to be blended based on the structure of the name. However, all of them commonly refer to the self-centred interest of the name-giver or the parents. For instance, names ending with *naaf* 'for me' and *nus* 'we/us' represent the name giver and/or parents, mother and father, or the clan

⁶ Business centers are commonly named after the newly coined personal names like 'Nimonia Hotel' or 'Bilissummaa Stationary'.

where the child belongs.

In the traditional approach of naming, instead of the stated blending and compounding, names were structured to communicate general social, political, philosophical, contextual and psychological feelings of the name-givers. For instance, instead of *Naanbooni* ‘being proud of me’ it might be *Boonaa* ‘conceited’ or ‘proud of oneself’. Similarly, instead of *Ifanaaf* ‘bright for me’ it might be *Ifaa* ‘bright’.

Some of our informants argued that the new names are recent creations and fashions that belong to the new generation regardless of ethnic background. According to these informants, name fashion is not unique to the Oromo; it is common everywhere. For instance, among the Amhara in Ethiopia, names like *Abebe* ‘flowering’ and *Kebede* ‘being heavy’ are common. However, as of recent times, they are becoming considered as old-fashioned names, belonging to older people. Currently, a number of new, differently structured and “more attractive” (as our informants described) names are also emerging among the Amhara people. Some examples are in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Amhara name	English Gloss	Amhara name	English Gloss
<i>Markan</i>	‘she attracted us’	<i>Markon</i>	‘he attracted us’
<i>Marsilas</i>	‘when honey is leaked’	<i>Absalat</i>	‘God drew her’
<i>Honeliyat</i>	‘it happened; let me see her’	<i>Bahak</i>	‘with justice’

Some of the recently coined Oromo personal names alternatively refer to the bearer of the name in dramatically different approaches from the previous conventional way of naming children. Table 3 below contains some of the examples.

Table 3

Afaan Oromo	English Gloss	Afaan Oromo	English Gloss
<i>Boonii</i>	‘be proud’	<i>Mo’iibul</i>	‘win forever’
<i>Keebeek</i>	‘know yours’	<i>Marsiimo’i</i>	‘encircle and win’
<i>Keenboon</i>	‘be proud of yours’	<i>Diigaajaaraa</i>	‘dismantle and construct’
<i>Mo’iisan</i>	‘win them’	<i>Walbeek</i>	‘know each other’
<i>Diindiigaa</i>	‘dismantle the enemy’		

Conventionally, most personal names refer to hope, expected responsibilities, intended behaviour and physical traits of the name-bearer. For instance, a typical Oromo name *Beekaa* ‘knowledgeable’ can be compared with *Keebeeki* ‘know yours’. The former general term hopes the child to be knowledgeable as such, whereas the latter is structured in the imperative for the

name-bearer to know what belongs to him/her. The names in the above table appear in the form of a command and/or piece of advice concerning what the name bearer ought to follow.

Another category of names focuses on a political, social or economic wish, mission or vision of the name-giver and/or the name-bearer. They also refer to the socio-political interests of the clan or ethnic group of the name-giver and/or the name-bearer. The following are some examples.

Table 4

Afaan Oromo	English Gloss	Afaan Oromo	English Gloss
<i>Mo'eeraa</i>	'I won'; 'he won'	<i>Bilisummaa</i>	'freedom'
<i>Sabboonaa</i>	'a nationalist'	<i>Nimoonaa</i>	'we shall win'

Personal names in the above list directly refer to the intended superior position or success of individuals/families/larger groups compared to their competitors. The intended superiority is mainly political. It can be social and economic as well. Usually, parents give names like *Moosisaa* 'enabling to win' or *Mootii* 'king' to their children when they wish them a winning position over their opponents or when they aspire for their children to be leaders. However, the recently coined names like *Mo'eeraa* 'I won'; 'he won' and *Marsiimo'i* 'encircle and win' appear more aggressive and violent.

Names that declare the priority and superiority of the name-bearer over anyone else form another typical category. These names are commonly given in recent times. The Oromo term *ol* is combined with another term to form names of this kind. The word *ol* refers to 'more than' or 'above'. Some examples are given in Table 5 below.

Table 5

Afaan Oromo	English Gloss	Afaan Oromo	English Gloss
<i>Diinaa'ol,</i>	'superior to the enemy'	<i>Firaa'ol</i>	'superior to relatives'
<i>Hundaa'ol</i>	'superior to all'	<i>Naa'ol</i>	'superior to me'

There are several other newly coined names in addition to the lists in the preceding tables. Some examples are given in Table 6 below.

Table 6

Afaan Oromo	English Gloss	Afaan Oromo	English Gloss
<i>Iftiyoom</i>	‘when shall it be bright’	<i>Yoomiif</i>	‘for when’
<i>Iftoom</i>	‘be transparent’	<i>Yoosan/Yeroosan</i>	‘at that time’
<i>Marsan</i>	‘they encircled’	<i>Keetooran</i>	‘yours is in order’
<i>Roobsan</i>	‘they cause flourishing/raining’	<i>Hanniisaa</i>	‘energy’
<i>Beekam</i>	‘be known’	<i>Kootoran</i>	‘mine is in order’
<i>Yerosaaf</i>	‘for his time’		

The sources of these names are either the parents or the name-bearers themselves. Firstly, parents, especially in urban areas, prefer to give their children Oromo and fashionable names of this kind. You can see some examples in the above list. There are also parents who still stick to the conventional Oromo names. Secondly, the name-bearers themselves change their former names and take new names through self-renaming. In both cases, the common Oromo names are gradually being replaced by the new ones.

Self-renaming

In this study, our data show that changing one’s own personal name is common and officially done. The initiative for personal name change is taken by the holder of the name. From a legal point of view, the Ethiopian civil code guarantees that everyone has the right to change his/her name (Civil Code 1960: Article 43).

Data taken from the Jimma University Registrar Office showed that in the 2014/15, 2015/2016 and 2016/17 academic years about 189, 208 and 234 students respectively changed their personal names. Out of 64 randomly picked personal name changes in 2014/2015, 30 names were changed either from non-Oromo to Oromo names and/or within Oromo names. 26 students changed their names within Amhara names. The remaining 8 changed their names within other Ethiopian languages.

Data from the primary sources, including interview and observation, indicated the following examples of names changed from non-Oromo to Oromo or within Oromo.

Table 7

Original Afaan Oromo/ Non Afaan Oromo Names	English Gloss	New Afaan Oromo Names	English Gloss
<i>Hajara</i>	‘devotee’ (Arabic)	<i>Ibsituu</i>	‘one who shines’
<i>Aberash</i>	‘you shine’ (Amharic)	<i>Ibsituu</i>	‘one who shines’
<i>Mitike</i>	‘my substitute’ (Amharic)	<i>Iftiyoom</i>	‘when shall it be light?’
<i>Dinke</i>	‘my surprise’ (Amharic)	<i>Naanati</i>	‘humble for me’
<i>Shalama</i>	‘God awards’ (Amharic)	<i>Rabbirraa</i>	‘from God’
<i>Legesse</i>	‘God donates’ (Amharic)	<i>Naaftol</i>	‘be good to me’
<i>Teshome</i>	‘appointed to power’ (Amharic)	<i>Naahil</i>	‘sympathise with me’
<i>Toleraa</i>	‘it is fine’ (Afaan Oromo)	<i>Kiyyaa</i>	‘mine’
<i>Dabaree</i>	‘it is by turn’ (Afaan Oromo)	<i>Lammii</i>	‘lineage’

As the above list shows, names were changed from non-Oromo to Oromo. An Arabic name (Muslim name) was changed to an Oromo name. There are also instances of personal name changes within Oromo.

Our analysis of data from different sources indicated that individuals choose their new Oromo names in two ways. First, some individuals directly translate their non-Oromo names into Oromo. For instance, as shown in Table 7, *Aberash* ‘you shine’ changed her name to *Ibsituu* ‘one who shines’, with more or less similar meanings. Such translations from Amhara to Oromo name merely change language, but the name retains the history or circumstance behind the original name giving that the name-giver intended to communicate.

The second alternative is to search for another Oromo name regardless of the circumstances attached to the first name. The way one of our informants received his current name is the best example. His original Amharic name was *Meseret* ‘foundation’ which he finally changed to *Nimoonaa* ‘we shall win’ in Oromo. To choose his new name, he selected five Oromo names of his choice: *Gaddisaa* ‘shading’, *Ayanaa* ‘good fortune’, *Nimoonaa* ‘we shall win’, *Letaa* ‘reproducing’ and *Odaa* ‘sycamore tree’ (which connotes ‘shade giving’ or ‘giving protection’). He made his final choice *Nimoonaa* ‘we shall win’ by a lottery method. These names, including the chosen one, have nothing to do with his initial name. All the five alternatives were selected to mark his Oromo identity. In the end, his personal taste and aesthetic evaluation of these names determined his final name choice. According to our informants, some young people do not bother about the meanings of their names and the events pertinent to their birth history.

Data from our informants who had direct experiences of changing their names or had friends that had changed their names indicated that the very objective of personal name change is also related to national examination cheating. In the Ethiopian academic system, there is one regional examination at grade eight and two national examinations at grade ten and twelve. The seating arrangements for these examinations are in alphabetical order. Students purposely change their names to names of outstanding students of their grade level. The intention is to sit

next to, or at least nearest to, the outstanding students and then to copy examination answers from them. According to our informants, changing personal names in order to cheat in examination is common among high school students. The change is not limited within Oromo names; instead one's name is randomly changed from a non-Oromo to an Oromo name or the other way round. Here, the main objective is to cheat examinations, not to mark identity or to have a fashionable name.

Name-givers versus name-bearers

Among the Oromo, bestowing a name on a child through a traditional religious institution, baptism or traditional name giving ritual is the mandate of the parents. Usually, it is assumed that parents name their children and that those names remain with their bearers throughout their lives and even thereafter. However, our data from the field showed that there are frictions between parents who want to maintain the original names they conferred upon their children and the youths who, for one reason or another, want to change their names. For instance, one of our informants who changed his name from *Mitiku* 'substitute' (in Amharic) to *Boonaa* 'conceited' or 'proud of oneself' (in Oromo) was challenged by his parents who were in favour of the original name. *Mitiku* wanted to change his name when he was in grade eight as well as grade ten, because he wanted to have an Oromo name, but both times he was not allowed to do so by his parents. However, *Mitiku* changed his personal name to *Boonaa* when he was in grade twelve without the consent of his parents.

The father particularly resisted the change of the name because he had given the name in reference to the unforgettable death of the immediate elder brother of *Mitiku*. This name was intended to describe that the family received compensation for the lost child. For the father, it is not the language that is more important, but the meaning of the name, which indicated the circumstances related to the birth of his son. To the contrary, for the son it was more important for his name to mark his Oromo identity.

Discussion

This study is concerned with the new trend of giving or taking personal names among the Oromo, and how individuals change their own personal names. Factors contributing to this effect are multifaceted and interrelated. Primarily, personal names are identity markers. Oromo individuals change their personal names to Oromo, and Oromo parents, especially in the urban areas, name their children with a new style of Oromo names to mark their ethnic identity, i.e., Oromoness. Young people boldly proclaimed that they had changed their non-Oromo names, religious and non-religious alike, which they had received from their parents and which had hidden their Oromoness. Our data unambiguously showed that personal names are among the identity markers at the disposal of the name-givers as well as the name-bearers. Moreover, our findings indicate that the naming process among the subject population is a reaction to the assimilation policy of the pre-1991 political environment.

This finding corroborates the views of several scholars (Lambek 2006; Bodenhorn & Vom Bruck 2006; Mandende 2009; Iteanu 2006) who indicate that personal names define individual identities and social-psychological boundaries for group-inclusion and exclusion. The finding

is also in line with the work of Agyekum (2006) who indicates that the post-Cold war political situation, in other words, the collapse of socialism, has brought the issue of collective identity to the fore. Agyekum's empirical examples from the Akan in Ghana reveal that recently personal names have been changed from non-Akan names into Akan names as identity markers. Benson (2006) indicates that black Americans have taken African names to link themselves with their remote African ancestors. Benson further comments that names are often used as a political tool of marginalisation as well as emancipation to undo a painful past. Imposed names affect people psychologically, and bearers of such names aspire to drop them.

The finding of this study also shows that some respondents are critical about the practice of changing personal name and coining non-conventional Oromo names. These people argued that a personal name is part of the life history of its bearer and has to be retained regardless of whether the name does or does not reflect the person's ethnic identity, cultural norms or social identity. According to this version of the argument, it would be better for people to retain their original names. This finding agrees with Bodenhorn and Vom Bruck (2006) who show that people often consider their names to be a sacred part of their personality, which they want to take care of regardless of the language in which it is given.

Some of our informants argued that a personal name is not an exclusive identity marker and even less important compared to practices of ethnic traditions and feelings of group obligation. Identity reconstruction through personal names is simplistic and belittles the wide and deep implications of personal names to current political reflection. Actual practices favouring group interest, such as pride in one's culture, participation in its rituals and speaking one's language are more important identity markers than personal names. In spite of the fact that their names are in Oromo, some of the young people with new fashionable Oromo names do not speak or even understand Afaan Oromo.

Despite the above argument and counter argument, practical instances indicated that there are parents who do not use common Oromo names that are bold enough to reveal the ethnic identities of the name-giver and name-bearer. For instance, instead of *Tolasaa* 'God's generosity', which is a typical Oromo name, they may prefer *Tolenuus* 'God is generous to us too', which is newly coined; instead of *Roobaa* 'one who rains', *Roobenuus* 'it rained for us too' is used. The meanings of the above conventional and new names are more or less the same, with slight variations in their structure, meaning and sound. According to some of our informants, the new names are recent creations. They are "stylish" and more "attractive"; and they show "better taste" and higher "aesthetic value". In this regard, our findings indicate that personal name preference is not only about labelling identity but also about fashion.

Our findings reveal that conventional names are often dropped in favour of new fashionable names. When young people think that their names are old-fashioned and no longer attractive, they readily change the names they received from their parents regardless of the language of the names. Our data from the field show that personal interest of having fashionable Oromo names is one of the factors leading people to change personal names. It may or may not be relevant to identity issues. Thus, the change can be undertaken within Oromo names.

Pertinent to this, Layne (2006) states that there is a personal name fashion by which the name-givers express their taste and values. New fashionable names are coined and designed, in the same way that, for instance, dressing and hairstyle follow fashion. New names are introduced, and others are dropped. This is a normal process in any language and social context. Our finding corroborates with Layne's view of personal name fashion.

Furthermore, as our findings indicate, the introduction of new personal names and changing one's own name goes beyond identity tagging and name fashion. It serves as a political tool

entailing expression of nationalism in which the bearers or the givers of the name express their political aspiration for freedom, liberation, equality, justice, etc. In this case, Oromo individuals change their personal names to more politically oriented Oromo names. For instance, names such as *Nimoona* ‘we shall win’ and *Bilisummaa* ‘freedom’ are typical examples in which either the name-givers or the self-naming bearers of the name express their hope of being liberated from a certain imposition. Some of the recently coined politically oriented Oromo names are not observed in the usual Oromo name stock and do not follow the Oromo philosophy of naming. Traditional Oromo names are accommodative in nature like *Firoomsaa* ‘one who makes relatives’ and non-discriminatory like *Firaa’ol* ‘above relatives’; they are conciliatory like *Araarsaa* ‘one who reconciles/making reconciliation’ and non-confrontational like *Marsimo’i* ‘encircle and win’; they are altruistic like *Guddisaa* ‘one who takes care of others’ and non-self-centred like *Keenbon* ‘be proud of yours’. These names are the result of the changing political, social and psychological life of the people. The name-givers or name-bearers have developed political feelings of being discriminated and denied freedom. As a result, they aspire to change the status quo. Their aspirations are reflected in their personal names. This finding confirms the work of Bodenhorn and Vom Bruck (2006), which shows how personal names become political currency.

This article also shows that a personal name can be changed in a very opportunistic and instrumental manner to meet a certain personal goal. Our data indicated that academically weak students often change their names to the name of academically active students to sit next to them and copy examination answers to pass regional and/or national examinations. This is common among students in secondary schools. In this case, the reason behind self-renaming is neither identity reconstruction nor having a fashionable personal name. This implies that personal names are not only gifts which the gift-giver wishes to provide to the recipient, as Layne (2006) argues, but it is also what the self-named wants to be or something coined for self-centred interest.

Our findings further imply that there have been new developments in relation to the guiding principles in naming processes. The newly designed personal names have little to do with birthday, place, time, family (ancestors), circumstantial and special events, physical appearance and behavioural features of the name bearers or belief system of the Oromo. Some names are politically oriented expressions of grievances, nationalism and patriotism of the name giver and/or name bearer. Others are simple expressions of emotions and aspirations. Still others are merely instrumental for personal benefit like passing national examination.

A contrary version of understanding the introduction of new Oromo names also prevailed among our research participants. Some argued that the Oromo elites who opt for the fashionable names are caught between two conflicting positions. On the one hand, they aspire to return to the Oromo names as markers of their Oromoness. On the other hand, they have dissociated themselves from the conventional way of naming and basic guiding principles of name giving in Oromo. They are reluctant to name their children or themselves by the typical Oromo names. Mostly, they opt for disguised names or names with concealed meanings (some of our informants say “confusing” names) which do not sound Oromo in terms of structure and meanings. One of our informants called them “Anglicised” Oromo personal names. They emerge from the perception that typical Oromo names are backward and cannot fit an urban lifestyle. These Oromo individuals seem to run away from Amharic and Hebrew names, but they end up with European names. It is another phase of identity crisis under the guise of identity reconstruction.

The meanings of some of these new names are not easily captured even by native speakers. Some of them do not only sound like non-Oromo words, but also their meanings are so hid-

den that they cannot be grasped immediately. Some of our informants directly mentioned some namesakes or coincidence of the names as evidence. For instance, in Table 1 the Oromo name *Naataanan* ‘it is fine for me’ has the same sound with *Näätänen*. Risto Näätänen is a Finnish psychological scientist and pioneer in the field of cognitive neuroscience. The name *Anijaan* ‘I by my eyes’ coincides with a 2014 Indian Tamil-language action film. The name *Roobena* ‘rained for me’ or ‘sprouting for me’ is prevalent in English and means ‘bright fame’.

In spite of the above argument our data do not directly and conclusively indicate that unfamiliar Oromo names are direct imitations of foreign names or terms. We argue that it is possible for two independently coined personal names to have similar sounds. Furthermore, coining new names and dropping older ones is related to the changing social and political landscape which has a direct impact upon personal names. Names are chosen based on the prevailing social and natural environments. Any change in the latter causes changes in the former.

Conclusion

Finally, we conclude that the introduction of new names and the ever-increasing personal name change among the Oromo are caused by multifaceted political, psychological and social factors. The newly coined names have emerged from a context of social and political changes at national, regional and global levels.

In the post-Cold War political environment ethnic identity has emerged as an important social phenomenon worldwide. In the same way, the collapse of the Ethiopian socialist regime in 1991 has brought the issues of ethnic identity to the fore on a national level. The Oromo who often complained about the assimilation policy under successive Ethiopian regimes since the formation of modern Ethiopian state in the late nineteenth century until the 1991 collapse of the socialist regime have been engaging in the reconstruction of their ethnic identity. The crafting of new names and changing the older ones have been part of their revival mission of finding their roots and airing their political interest and feelings.

New personal names are also coined or adopted based on one’s own personal taste, the perceived beauty of the name and the purpose the name serves, whether it is an identity marker and/or opportunity provider. In this regard, the introduction of new and fashionable names has been partly the result of human creativity and the official state promotion of the Oromo language in the post-1991 Ethiopian political environment, which guarantees the use of this language as a medium of instruction and official working language. It is usual for a language to drop and add words as well as introduce new meanings. The newly emerging Oromo personal names can be understood within this context. These emerging words that are used as personal names are also used as cultural resources and practices. These names are instruments that grasp the changing worldview as well as the day-to-day practices of the people.

As part of the overall changes in socio-cultural practices, the new names are not simple, random and empty individual markers; rather they are indexically associated to newly emerging socio-cultural values. In general, the Oromo worldview and ways of life are changing along with the changing world and so are also their preferences for crafting personal names. The performance of name giving takes place in the framework of the existing and emerging socio-political context. These names mark not only the name-bearers, but also direct how they act and participate in social activities. In this regard, Agyekum’s (2006) concepts of indexicality, performance and participation are the three interrelated analytical concepts that help us understand the role of language in culture.

Theoretically, McKinsey's (2010) individualistic cluster-of-descriptions theory is pertinent to this article. The introduction of Oromo names with a new structure and meanings that have not been part of the former Oromo name stock is common practice. The creation of new meaningful Oromo names from words or combination of words is intended to indicate one's ethnic identity, political mission and vision, as well as psychological and social disposition. The practice of name changing and self-renaming seems to emerge from individual name-givers or takers who invent a certain personal name based on their interest regardless of any name giving social practices. The new names are free choices and independent creations of the name givers and/or bearers. They are not necessarily from parents or religious institutions or any other socially accepted name giving ritual. However, regardless of what these words are intended to communicate, personal names are signifiers or tags used to refer to their bearers. Thus, names establish links between the holders of the names and their identity, and enable communication with their bearers. Names also reflect the way in which their bearers or givers think and see the world around them.

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